

WHO BURNT THE GRAND LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA?

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ABSTRACT:

The grand library of Alexandria was already destroyed long before the Islamic era. Some people with ill intentions spread the idea that it was burnt by the second Caliph of Islam, Umar R.A. Tracing back the intentions behind this intellectual dishonesty reveals the political motivations and missionary aims of those who propagate this fabricated story. Some historians copied this idea from its generators without any investigation (as is the case with many books of history from that time). The missionaries and the atheists found it as a lucrative opportunity and got clung on to it. Even after it has been comprehensively proven as fabricated, still there are many who are not willing to reject it as they consider it in perfect alignment with their own agendas. A vast majority of researchers (Muslims as well non-Muslims) who have studied this matter critically have out-rightly rejected such an allegation on Caliph Umar. In this article we have presented an overview of relevant literature with an intention to re-analyse this issue and assess the allegations made against Umar R.A., the second caliph of Islam.

INTRODUCTION:

After Alexander the great, the kingship of Egypt came in the hands of Ptolemy I¹ who assigned the task of creating this huge library to Demetrius (Delia, 1992; Thiem, 1979), a philosopher of Greek origins and an advocate for Aristotle's thought² (Delia, 1992). "The Great Library of Alexandria was founded by Ptolemy I but completed and extended by Ptolemy II. Ptolemy was keen to support scientific research and was a generous sponsor of the arts" (Hill, 2012). He was a man who loved knowledge and books. In line with his passion, he sponsored the collection of approximately 500,000 books on various subjects in the library in the form of papyrus roles³ (Thiem, 1979). It is this library that is known as the "Library of Alexandria". Thiem (1979) suggests that in addition to the main library, there was also a "daughter" library which was different from the "mother" or the original grand library.

¹ "Ptolemy I Soter, (born 367/366 bc, Macedonia—died 283/282, Egypt) Macedonian general of Alexander the Great, who became ruler of Egypt (323–285 bc) and founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty". ("Ptolemy I Soter | Macedonian king of Egypt | Britannica.com," 2016)

² He is believed to be a student of Aristotle who fled from Athens due to political troubles (Katrın Kuznik, 2007) and came to Egypt where he gradually acquired high status in the court.

³ Papyrus roles were the writing materials used historically before the invention of paper. They were made from papyrus leaves which were knitted together, dried and hammered to convert them in a materials suitable for writing. Picture 1 show imagination of artists regarding how the grand library of Alexandria would have looked like filled with these papyrus roles.

The details about the destruction of these libraries are not available in full and existing stories are full of contradictions and controversies.

Thiem (1979) mentions:

Specialists have at one time or another disputed each of the burnings, and no date or dates have produced a consensus of opinion. What seems indisputable is that at some point in history, the Alexandrian library, center and symbol of Hellenistic culture, burned. The precise seed of truth about the destruction may have been lost forever among the luxuriant tales that sprouted from it. (p. 508)

In this article, we have presented a thematic literature review on the subject with a special focus on the story that links destruction of this library to the second of Caliph of Islam, Umar R.A.

STORIES ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF LIBRARY:

Thiem (1979) suggested that there are at least three stories about the burning of library(s) which are often intertwined with controversies.

The three stories are as follows:

1. First, Julius Caesar⁴ may have inadvertently burned all or part of the Mouseion library (i.e. the “mother library”) in 47 B.C.;
2. Second, the Emperor Theodosius may have provoked the burning of the Serapeum library (i.e. the “daughter” library) circa 390 A.D.
3. Third, according to this story, the Caliph Umar is alleged to have ordered the burning of the same library circa 642 A. This is the point that the current study explores in details i.e. burning of an already burnt library.

There is another story that attributes the destruction to Aurelian's invasion. We have also discussed that story at length later on in this paper.

⁴ Julius Caesar was born in 100 BC in Rome. He held a number of government positions. In 52 BC, Caesar went on to Egypt, where he involved himself in upholding the rule of Cleopatra, with whom he had a son Caeserion.

This is the time when he is attributed to have played a part in burning a part of the library. In his later life, as he got more and more powers, he began to utilize them for his political benefits and was accordingly assassinated in the roman senate. (“Julius Caesar,” 2013)



Picture 1: "The Great Library of Alexandria" as imagined by O. Von Corven [D. 1886] (Hessel, 2001)

WHO REALLY BURNT LIBRARY?

The findings from the literature review suggest that some books, which researchers claim to be 40,000, were burnt at the time of Caesar. However, they were not in the central library at that time. The burning by the Emperor Theodosius is also backed up by quite strong evidence; however, it was most probably the daughter library. The destruction of the main library can be attributed to the Aurelian's invasion. The allegations that Umar R.A. or the Muslims burnt this library are rejected by most scholars and do not hold any valid grounds.

Following is an explanation of above mentioned point.

Destruction by Caesar:

This story is explained in Encyclopaedia Britannica as follows:

In 48 bce Julius Caesar became involved in a civil war in Egypt between Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy XIII. Caesar sided with Cleopatra and was soon besieged by the Ptolemaic forces by land and sea in the great harbour. He realized that his only chance lay in setting fire to the enemy fleet, and it was by that drastic measure that he managed to gain the upper hand. Yet he is remarkably silent regarding the extent of the destruction caused by the fire in the city itself. Subsequent authors, however, provide details of the ensuing destruction. Most explicit is Plutarch, who, after a personal visit to Alexandria, explained that "Caesar was forced to repel the danger by using fire, which spread from the dockyards and destroyed the Great Library." Equally indicative is a statement by Strabo who, during a long stay in the city (c. 25–20 bce), expressed in an

indirect manner his regrets over the loss of that great library that had once supplied Eratosthenes and Hipparchus with the original reports of earlier discoveries, sources that were no longer there for him to consult. ("Library of Alexandria | ancient library, Alexandria, Egypt," 2016)

Canfora and Coleman (1999) have examined various claims about the burning of the grand library of Alexandria, and its subsidiary and 're-incarnated' library, and questioned them. They criticize the attribution of burning to Caesar.

In line with the findings from Canfora and Coleman, Delia (1992) also questions the burning of books by Caesar which raises even more questions about the authenticity of stories related to this event. She mentioned about the incident that

CONTEMPORARY SOURCES WERE SURPRISINGLY SILENT. A century later, the younger Seneca remarked on the loss of some 40,000 papyrus rolls without suggesting that the main library itself was destroyed. Three generations after Seneca, however, Plutarch wrote of a conflagration spreading from the Eastern Harbor that destroyed "the great book collection," promulgating the irresistible irony that so eminent a man of letters as Caesar had, in a single stroke, annihilated the ancient world's most outstanding monument to intellectual achievement. (p. 1461).

Burning during Aurelian's invasion:

Canfora and Coleman (1999) seem to be quite firm about when the end of those old collections came, based on their analysis of historical facts.

According to them, it was during the time when Alexandria was the scene of a ferocious war between the emperor Aurelian (270-275 AD) and Queen Zenobia. During the course of the civil war, most of the district known as 'Bruchion' was destroyed. It was the quarter where the old palace was located, inside of which was the Great Library.

The story is mentioned in Encyclopaedia Britannica as follows:

The daughter library, protected by the Serapeum, subsisted up to the 4th century as long as paganism survived. But when Christianity became the one and only religion acknowledged throughout the empire, Emperor Theodosius I in his zeal to wipe out all vestiges of paganism issued a decree in 391 sanctioning the demolition of temples in Alexandria. Empowered by the imperial decree, Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, led an attack on the Serapeum, and he himself gave the first blow to the cult statue of Serapis. His frenzied followers ran amok in the temple, destroying and plundering. When the destruction was complete, Theophilus ordered a church to be built on the site. Several testimonies written by contemporary or near-contemporary eyewitnesses testify to the fact that the devastation was extensive. One Theodoret claims that "the temple was destroyed to its foundations." ("Library of Alexandria | ancient library, Alexandria, Egypt," 2016)

Confora and Coleman's finding that the destruction was caused by Aurelian's invasion is in alignment with what Delia points out:

In A.D. 272, the entire royal district was ravaged during Aurelian's invasion, which aimed at recapturing the city occupied first by the army of the Palmyran queen, Zenobia, and subsequently by the supporters of the usurper, Firmus. It is unlikely that the Museum complex survived this catastrophe unscathed. If it was reduced to ruins, the remnants of its collection that had not been preempted by private collectors would have been transferred to the Serapeum, Kaisareion, and Claudianum annexes. Twenty-three years later, in the summer of A.D. 295, Diocletian visited Alexandria in response to widespread disaffection in Egypt. The city was taken by storm and sacked; citizens were slaughtered and their private book collections confiscated and burned. The reinscription of a Museum monument by a private individual at this time suggests the reign of Diocletian as a terminus ad quem for its demise and of the library housed within it. Further damage was caused by an earthquake in the summer of 365. (Delia, 1992, p. 1463)

Philips (2010) pointed out that:

One report by Ammianus Marcellinus recounts that the district was razed to the ground, and one scholar, at least, is convinced that this is the event that destroyed the entirety of the Great Library.[120]

Burning on the orders of the emperor Theodosius:

Delia (1992) explains this incident as follows:

Aphthonios, who visited Alexandria around 315, noted that, although a library still existed in the Serapeum complex, only those alcoves containing philosophical works were accessible, and the stacks associated with the cult of pagan deities had been closed. In 391, the emperor Theodosius I banned pagan rituals.¹ That same year, a Christian mob led by the patriarch of Alexandria, Theophilus, gutted and sacked the Serapeum. Within a generation, when a throng of angry Christians brutally murdered the pagan neo-Platonic mathematician-philosopher Hypatia, the Kaisareion had already been transformed into a church. Even had the cult of the Muses survived into the fourth century, it is inconceivable that it survived similar reprisals. Writing at the beginning of the fifth century A.D., Eunapius describes the pagan temples at Alexandria as "scattered to the winds," in terms of their cult ceremonies. The actual buildings, in many cases, had been converted into Christian churches. His contemporary, the presbyter Orosius, proffers an eyewitness report that Christians had thoroughly plundered the contents of Alexandrian libraries. (pp. 1463-1464)

Philips (2010) explains:

Yet another story of the Great Library's destruction says that it was destroyed by religious riots in 391 CE. By this time, Christianity has been declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. The holdings at the Mouseion and at the Serapeum were both on

the precincts of pagan temples. While this had previously lent them a measure of protection, in the days of the Christian Roman Empire, it placed them in a certain amount of danger. As one author put it, "Early Christians threatened Alexandria's scholarly culture; they viewed pagan philosophers and learning with suspicion, if not enmity". In the days of the Emperor Theodosius, when Alexandria was under the authority of the fanatic Bishop Theophilus, their danger became critical. In 391 CE, Emperor Theodosius issued a decree sanctioning the destruction of all pagan temples in Alexandria. Inspired by this decree, Theophilus lead a mob to the entrance to the Serapeum, where, reputedly, he struck the first blow against the temple. His frenzied cohorts followed suit, eventually demolishing the entire Temple of Serapis. When the devastation of the temple was complete, Theophilus ordered a church to be built on the site of the ruins (Philips, 2010, p. 5).

Another story of the Great Library's destruction begins with strife between the sizeable Jewish and Christian populations of Alexandria.

In 415 CE, violence broke out between the factions, and the Christian prefect of Alexandria, Cyril⁵, directed the Jews to leave. Renowned teacher, astronomer and mathematician Hypatia, who is often known as the last great scholar associated with the Great Library, protested. Cyril ordered her execution. The story recounts that she was then murdered by a mob of Cyril's followers, who then sacked the Great Library and burned it to the ground⁶.

This could possibly be the "re-incarnated" library established from the previous remains.

⁵ Cyril succeeded his uncle Theophilus as bishop of the see of Alexandria in 412 and came in conflict with the civil administration over the zeal with which he championed orthodoxy.

He closed the churches of the Novatians, a schismatic sect that denied the power of the church to absolve those who had lapsed into idolatry during persecution. He also was involved in the expulsion of Jews from Alexandria ("Saint Cyril of Alexandria | Christian theologian | Britannica.com," 2016)

⁶ Some researchers attribute the killing of Hypatia to Peter, an affiliate of Cyril. According to New Advent Church History, Book VII, he and his mob, charged with a fierce and bigoted zeal:

"waylaid her returning home, and dragging her from her carriage, they took her to the church called Caesareum, where they completely stripped her, and then murdered her with tiles. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them. This affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church" (Zenos & Knight, 2009).



Picture 2: Goleniscev Papyrus from 5th century showing Pope Theophilus standing on the Serapeion (Elsner, 1998, p. 256)

Burning on the orders of Umar R.A.:

This story is mentioned as follows:

The final individual to get blamed for the destruction is the Moslem Caliph Omar. In 640⁷ AD the Moslems took the city of Alexandria. Upon learning of "a great library containing all the knowledge of the world" the conquering general⁸ supposedly asked Caliph Omar for instructions. The Caliph has been quoted as saying of the Library's holdings, "they will either contradict the Koran, in which case they are heresy, or they will agree with it, so they are superfluous." So, allegedly, all the texts were destroyed by using them as tinder for the bathhouses of the city. Even then it was said to have taken six months to burn all the documents. But these details, from the Caliph's quote to the incredulous six months it supposedly took to burn all the books, weren't written down until 300 years after the fact. (Chessier, 2014)

⁷ Many scholars consider the date of conquest to be 642AD (Sijpesteijn, 2007)

⁸ The commander of the Muslim army was Amr b. al-As⁻ R.A who went to fight a great power of the time with only a 4000 men. At the time of conquest "in Egypt, Constantinople's Catholic authorities had persecuted, flogged, tortured and executed Monophysite Christians, and the Monophysites saw the Arabs as liberators. So too did Egypt's peasants, who had felt oppressed by tyrannical, mostly Greek, landlords" (Smitha, 2015). This Muslim army that went to Egyptian conquest not only had Muslims from various parts of the world but also the Christians who chose to take part in the battle (Sijpesteijn, 2007).

Though, there are some weak points in almost all of the relevant stories, the story that links the destruction of library to Muslim conquest of the Egypt is considered to be a pure fabrication by most scholars.

Thiem (1979) highlights that:

Most modern authorities such as A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt* (Oxford, 1902)- have doubted the Saracen burning under Omar, but Parsons, who disputes the Caesarian and Christian destructions, argues that the Saracen one did occur. (p. 508)

From this footnote we see that:

- Most modern authorities reject the idea that the library was burnt by Umer R.A.
- And, that the person who insists that it was burnt by Umer R.A. is the one who denies the Christian burnings. This opinion is inconsistent with the findings from a number of researchers and is explained further in this article.

Thiem comments while discussing the account of this event recorded by Gibbon⁹: "Gibbon shows his characteristic narrative finesse in retelling the familiar story before attacking its authenticity" (p. 510). Once the story-telling part is done, Gibbon questions the authenticity of this story and argues that even if it would have occurred, its impact would have been minimal and the major blow was the event when the Christians in Theodosius's reign devastated the library. Gibbon takes the explanation forward and mentioned that the burning of books, if it was ever done by Muslims (which he doubts), was an action "devoted to the benefit of mankind" owing to the stuff it contained.

Gibbon provides references to the previous researchers who have highlighted that Muslims refrain from burning the books of Judaic and Christian faiths for the respect of name of God mentioned therein. Afsaruddin (1990) also clarified the approach of Muslims towards the reception of non-Islamic works in the Islamic world:

The Muslim attitude toward "pagan" knowledge was characterized by great receptivity. When the Arabs conquered Iran in the 7th century, they fell heir to the rich repository of Hellenistic thought and knowledge safeguarded by the Gondishapur school at Khuzistan. This was the school set up by the Sassanian emperor Khusrau Anushirvan, whose court had provided refuge to both Greek philosophers fleeing from Athens because of the Emperor Justinian's persecution in the sixth century, and to Christian scholars escaping from the Syrian school of Edessa.(Afsaruddin, 1990, p. 292)

She further emphasised her point as follows:

Under Muslim aegis, many ancient literary works were rendered from the original Greek, Pahlavi, Aramaic, and Sanskrit into Arabic. In the ninth century, the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) was set up by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun in Baghdad to provide

⁹ "Edward Gibbon (27 April 1737 – 16 January 1794) was an English historian and Member of Parliament. His most important work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, was published in six volumes between 1776 and 1788" ("Edward Gibbon - Christian Classics Ethereal Library," 2016). His works are known for an open criticism of organized religion.

patronage to celebrated translators like the Christian Hunayn ibn Ishaq and the Sabian Thabit ibn Qurra. The works of Galen, Aristotle, Ptolemy and Hippocrates, among others, were translated into Arabic. Many works of classical antiquity were thus preserved for posterity and when later made available to the West, they helped trigger the European renaissance. Intellectual tolerance was a hallmark of medieval Islamic civilization. The critical and important role that this civilization has played in the preservation and dissemination of ancient thought bears irrefutable testimony to that. (Afsaruddin, 1990, p. 292)

Lewis proves this story as fabricated by coupling historical works with logical argumentation. He mentions:

Paper was not introduced in Egypt until centuries after the Arab conquest, and many if not most, of the books at that time would have been written in vellum, which does not burn. To keep that many bathhouse furnaces going for that length of time, a library of at least 14 million books would have been required. Another difficulty is that John the grammarian who, according to the Barhebraeus story, pleased with 'Amr for this literary probably lived and died in the previous century. In any case, there is good evidence that the library itself was destroyed long before the Arabs arrived in Egypt. (p. 214)

Findings from Qassem (2008) are also consistent with above account who have explained about the death of John the grammarian, also known as Yahia Al-Nahwy, which happened a century before the Islamic conquest of Egypt.

Hitti (1970, p. 166) explained, "the great Ptolemaic library was burnt as early as 48 B.C.E. by Julius Ceasar. A later one, referred to as the daughter library, was destroyed about 389 C.E. as a result of an edict by the Emperor Theodosius. At the time of the Arab conquest, therefore, no library of importance existed in Alexandria and no contemporary writer ever brought the charge about Amr or Umar."

From above explanations, the following points become clear and explain why this story is most likely a fabrication made by the historians centuries after the actual incident took place.

Prof. Asma Afsaruddin of Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Indiana University explains about the destruction of library as follows:

The main part of the Alexandrian library is widely believed to have been destroyed by fire when Julius Caesar besieged Alexandria in 47 B.C. The subsidiary library at the Serapeum was sacked by zealous Christians in 391 A.D., following an edict issued by the Emperor Theodosius. (Afsaruddin, 1990, p. 292)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover all the researchers who claim this story to be a fabricated one. As a summary, we will present following paragraph from Lewis (2008):

A succession of other Western scholars have analysed and demolished the story – Alfred Butler in 1902, Victor Chauvin in 1911, Paul Casanova and Eugenio Griffini, independently in 1923.

How the myth about Muslim burning of the grand library came into being?

The story about involvement of Muslims in burning of library was first presented by Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, (1162–1231). The story then made its way in the works of Ibn al-Qifti (1172–1248). Abul Faraj, a Christian priest took off this story from Al-Qifti's works. "Abul al-Faraj's account was followed by Abul al-Fida' in the early fourteenth century and later by al-Maqrizi in his history of the Copts, *Kitab al-khitat*. Failure to report the Arab destruction of the Alexandrian library in the eyewitness account of John of Nikiou, in the works of contemporary Christian historians such as Severus of Ashmunein and Eutychius, and in Al-Baladhuri and Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam's detailed accounts of the Arab conquest of Egypt renders this tradition highly suspect" (Delia, 1992, p. 1465).

Encyclopaedia Britannica also summarizes the disputed nature of subject story:

The events of the early Arab conquests were recorded by historians from several sides, including Arabs, Copts, and Byzantines. For more than five centuries after the conquest, there was no mention of and not a single reference to any accident related to an Alexandrian library under the Arabs. Suddenly, early in the 13th century appears an account reported by Ibn al-Qiftī and other Arab authors describing how 'Amr had burned the books of the ancient Library of Alexandria. The story has a fictitious flavour and has repeatedly been criticized, notably by 18th-century British historian Edward Gibbon, and it has since been proved to be a 12th-century fabrication. ("Library of Alexandria | ancient library, Alexandria, Egypt," 2016)

Lewis (2008) explains the travel of this story to the western world as follows:

The story became known to Western scholarship in 1663, when Edward Pcocke, the Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, published an edition of the Arabic text with Latin translation, of part of the Compendious History of the Dynasties of the Syrian-Christian author Barhebraeus, also known as Abu Al-Faraj. (p.213)

This story suddenly surfaced in the thirteenth century after five and a half centuries of silence. The origin of this story can possibly have a number of different roots.

Delia suspects that such political circumstances at that time led to creation of fabricated stories to reinforce certain opinions and ideas. The same opinion and suspicion is endorsed by Lewis (2008) who claims that the people at that time could have fabricated the story to justify their own actions. Though the point about suspicion is common, Delia and Lewis have different interpretations to why such fabrication would have been made.

After the conquest of Jerusalem under Salah ud Din, Arab historians flourished and used their writings to propagate the ideas they or their rulers wished to propagate. Salah ud Din, after conquering the Fatimid caliphate, decided to get rid of their heretical books through sale to pay for the expenses. The books were accordingly sold to other countries and private collectors. To support his actions, some historians of the time (e.g. Abdul Latif who was an admirer of Salah ud Din and Ibn Al-Qifti who was appointed as a Qadi at that time) could have thought that fabricating a story about

Umar R.A. could become a means to support the action of Salah ud Din. No evidence suggests that Salah ud Din ever wanted that. Also, his action (i.e. selling the books rather than destroying them) was not what the story alleges Umar R.A. for. The sale of Fatimid books was not done by Salah ud Din alone. Fatimid ruler themselves sold some library collections earlier to manage their expenses.

Hitti (1970) stated that the story "is one of those tales that make good fiction but bad history."

How the myth about Muslim burning of the grand library came into being?

The story was welcome in the Christian world at the time due to a number of political factors. Interestingly, despite all the refutations, we still see this fabricated story being told and referred to by some, especially by missionaries, atheist and certain secular factions.

Afsaruddin considers such an opinion as the "anti-intellectualism". She explains:

Even after the historian Edward Gibbon decried this myth and set the record straight in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London/Chicago: 1952, vol. 2, p. 274) and other historians followed suit (Hitti, Philip. *History of the Arabs*. London: 1940, p. 166), this spurious story has not been finally laid to rest. One suspects that medieval European Christian sensibilities proved receptive to this denigrating depiction of Muslims, and since the past is always with us, has assured the story of a long life in the West. (Afsaruddin, 1990, pp. 291–292)

Lewis (2008) also seems to be surprised about this myth still not being discarded by some. He says:

Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, some writers are still disposed to believe and even repeat the story of how the Great Library of Alexandria was destroyed by the Arabs after their conquest of the city in 642 A.D., by order of the Caliph 'Umar. This story – its origins, purpose, acceptance, and rejection – provides an interesting example of how such historical myths arise and, for a while at least, flourish. (p. 213)

Lewis (2001) accordingly summarizes:

"Modern research has shown the story to be completely unfounded. None of the early chronicles, not even the Christian ones, make any reference to this tale, which is mentioned in the thirteenth century, and in any case the great library of Serapenum had already been destroyed in internal dissensions before the coming of the Arabs." (p. 54)

CONCLUSION:

In this article, we have proven with abundant evidence that the destruction of the grand library of Alexandria happened in phases and had nothing to do with the second of caliph of Islam, Umar R.A. Unbiased researchers have consistently rejected this fabrication and it is only those with ill intentions who persist with such base-less allegations. Mawalana Shibli Nomani is considered to be the first one who refuted these claims in his book 'An Enquiry into the destruction of the ancient Alexanderian library' (Nomani & Sayeed, 1893). The refutation was then endorsed by a number of orientalist scholars in 20th century.

The destruction of books, unfortunately, has continued to happen and it is the Muslims who have lost the most. Considering the recent destruction of literary treasures of Egypt, Professor Trevor Watkins of Edinburgh is reported to have said: "The loss of Iraq's cultural heritage will go down in history – like the burning of the library at Alexandria – and Britain and the US will be to blame" (Raven, 2004, p. 12).

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